Ion Luca's Drama of Theological Expression. A Special Look upon *Salba reginei* (The Queen's Necklace) Play

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Ion Luca, a través de su teatro religioso, aportó páginas esenciales en la dramaturgia rumana. Teólogo por su primera formación, él intenta a escribir de nuevo un capítulo de la historia bíblica. Su teatro religioso, prohibido durante el régimen comunista, fue etiquetado, por desgracia, como subversivo y peligros. Poco conocido hoy en día, solo en círculos pequeños, este merecería más atención por parte de nosotros. Su teatro ofrece nada más que una respuesta personal al ambiente teológico-cultural que lo circunscribe.

Parabla clave: Ion Luca, drama, teología literaria.

During the interval between the Two World Wars, within the local dramatic literature there appear the signs of a movement that would mean the beginning of a special stage for drama, of a modern complexity. It is the most fertile period of the Romanian cultural life - the first decades of the twentieth century, when the Kingdom of Romania was reaching the maximum ever achieved potential on behalf of our people. Next to the consecrated playwrights' generation prior to the First World War: Victor Eftimiu, Michael Sorbul, Caton Theodorian, Mircea Bîrsan, G. Diamandy, Mircea Dem Radulescu, Ion Pereț, Michael Săulescu, Alfred Moşoiu, a considerable contribution to the development of drama has been done by authors with a dramaturgically dominated vocation, such as George Ciprian, Alexandru Kiriţescu, Mircea Ştefănescu, Tudor Muşatescu Valjan (V. Al. Jean, aka Ion Alexandru Vasilescu), as well as the prestigious multifaceted writers: Lucian Blaga, Camil Petrescu, Victor Ion Popa, George Michael Zamfirescu, Mihail Sebastian, Victor Papilian, Nicolae Iorga and Vasile Voiculescu.

This review of a few names belonging to the generation of playwrights congener with Ion Luca, the theologian who set off from Bacău and continued to develop himself as a playwright in a particularly animated literary landscape, is a succinct and inevitably incomplete one.

The best plays of the playwright, who bear two evangelists' names, are those written prior to the fall of the communist curtain. He is one of the authors that embodies the Romanian drama's searches, consonant with the political, social, and

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cultural unrest to be found in the aftermath of the First World War, when our kingdom was comprising the majority of the territories inhabited by Romanians, although it was supporting internal pressures specific of a society found in constant transformation.

The creation route of Ion Luca offers an image of diversity - of theme, of inspiring sources, of artistic treatment, and of moral attitude – that which constitutes also the essential of his contribution within the autochthonous scenery. For the author, the presence of God is intrinsic to this world, the vitalism and theological themes (accused by some critics), are essential aspects of the tutelary Truth that stands as the background of all heroes' life, out of his plays.

Essentially, the Paschal Christological drama *Salba reginei*, seems to me that it is undergoing a very clear criterion, deliberately triggered, namely: the evil can very easily be an alternative to the quotidian facet. I have structured the premonitory signs the following presentation-fragment, which, could receive, if need be, the adding, after the mentioned inscription, of a didactical subtitle: *Randomness as a tactic of the devil*:

"Jerusalemite crossing of streets. At the back, a gate through which, descending a few steps, you get into a wider lane, with exits on the right and left. Through the crossroads passes a mixed crowd of many colours. On the stage, the high priest Annas and two of his disciples: Baruch and Isaac"[1].

"We are the chosen people! ... Let us not doubt it seeing that the Romans rule over us. Their sandal presses us as slaves. I know! Nevertheless, in the shadow of everybody's contempt, our scholarly possession is perfecting our smile that bites! (Ghostly). We are spread in all the cities of the world! Merchants want us everywhere. Moreover, if our appearance and the law show us slaves among peoples, the truth is that all the people serve for our life of leisure! Through the sieve of trade, heavy taxes they pay us! ... Buying-selling! Here is the tool through which we fill our girdle with the gold of those who think that they are ruling us! (...) Wisdom is not wisdom if it does not drive the chosen people to rule the world…"[2].

"The necklace of white, pink, black pearls. The Queen of Memphis' necklace"[3].

The premonitory signs are significant for the musical like elaboration of the drama; they serve as suggestive advertisements for the central theme. In a certain sense, it could lead to a dual interpretation of the drama from the perspective of the musical art, if we consider them statements of an overtures, then we are facing a opera-drama (and libretto), and if we consider them counterpoint elements, then we are facing a symphony-drama. The most distant descent of Ion Luca's passion for the musical art is the one mentioned already during his seminarian learning period, when he frequently auditioned and interpreted violin concertos.

[1] Ion Luca, *Salba reginei. Teatru religios.* Bacău: Editura Corgal Press, 2005, p. 19.
[2] *Ibidem,* p. 20.
[3] *Ibidem,* p. 20.

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Every analyst is credited with a natural liberty, especially when it comes to an *immaculate* opera (*a Terra incognita*), as it is the Lucan drama *Salba reginei.* Having underlined this fact, I would venture, with all modesty, to advance an interpretation if not unprecedented, at least more unusual for the Christological drama - and this, referring strictly from the perspective of the three texts that I have included under the generic term of *premonitory signs*. Thus, from their perspective, if the drama admits an approximation of a music like construction, then I dare say that it admits symmetrically one of fine arts too (as far as scenography falls within the sphere of fine arts). Let us not forget that every playwright is, first and foremost, a theatre man and even a determined director. Consequently, we can considered that the three aforementioned texts, are subject to interpretation as translated rudiments of a plastic stage, in the composition of which would enter three elements, two concrete and one abstract: 1) a deserted alley; 2) an endless appearance aspiring at world domination; 3) and the occult terror that they entail, by introducing the pre-Christian paganism symbol, the necklace the "pride" of the old world.

This structuring of elements, leads my thought to a fine art scene, articulated with the props pieces belonging to the *metaphysical painting*. I am thinking of Georgio de Chirico (1888-1978) and Carlo Carrà (1881-1966). Of course, I do not know if Ion Luca knew their work. However, I know he was a playwright, thus open towards the approach of fine arts, the pictorial stance, and, moreover, in the Romania of his literary beginnings, there was a powerful futuristic mediation, or, the metaphysical painting consists of progeny (as a response) of futurism; thus there are chances that Ion Luca has known somehow these works. I would dare to go further and - making an associative effort, to put next to each other - under the patronage of a purely *imaginary museum* – a possible canvas made according to the above mentioned suggestions, to *The Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* picture of Georgio de Chirico.

The apocryphal story regarding Jesus of Nazareth and Judas of Kerioth, is pervaded from one end to another by the religious spirit, upon which it is based. Only in this religious light - more specifically, a theological one - it can be seen and perceived. The thesis of the drama is not of a naive dreamer, it "waves the faith into immortality" and proclaims the life to come the "life beyond youth, beyond old age". His anthropology views the man in his profound originality, built on the law of good, the human being distinguishing itself through an original beauty, obtained through the immanent God's whole participation (*metousia*), thus it reflects, on the one hand, the image (*ikon, imago*), and, on the other, the glory (*doxa, gloria*) of God.

The thesis of the drama, incredibly absurd for the contemporaries, breaks the narrow limits of the old vision, recommending "*abstinence, poverty, humility, silence*" ... it addresses to each one individually, and the merits on a spiritual level, are no longer dependent on belonging to a nation, but it concerns the personal

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choice and the deeds that can reinforce this choice, "*love* being *the core of his preaching*"[4].

Although Jesus is not a character in the drama, it is certain that He appears alive in the play, it seems a Christ cut out of the Synoptic Gospels (especially from Matthew), with a precise physiognomy, outlined from the others' conglomerate of accounts.

"Judah (Ghostly): Jesus of Nazareth! / Ana: Well spoken. The Nazareth is the citadel of Galilee. Galilee is the Galilee of the Gentiles ... Only a Galilean is able to come up with the tenderness between peoples. / Judas: Jesus is a Jew! / Ana: By law, perhaps. / Judah: Joseph, the father, is from the Bethlehem of Judea. / Ana: Too old was His lawful father, to believe that the real father was not one of the non-Jews who overwhelm the Galilee of the Gentiles. / Judah (Lost): The Virgin bore out of God! / Ana: Cock and bull story! / Judas (not paying attention, reckons): the Virgin is Galilean. On His mother's side, Jesus is half Galilean. / The Galilean carries within Himself all the people. Therefore, Jesus is the bundle of all nations that there exist ... Bar half, on His Father side? Half, is from God. The seed of the Holy Spirit is the humanity that has not lived yet, the humanity that will be! ... To gather! ... Jesus, the maternal half, the whole ancient humanity. Half, after God The Father, is the whole new humanity"...[5].

Referring to this passage and making use of the arguments offered by the arsenal of proletcultist ideology, Nina Cassian characterizes Ion Luca as "*anti-Semitic and racist*"[6], using the Stalinist Communism's favourite cliché. She opines here that the author does nothing else than "trying to prove that Jesus was not a Jew, his mother being from Galilee (the Galilee of the Gentiles-mixture of many nations), and the Holy Spirit being the unborn yet humanity, the future one. From here to the assertion that Jesus was pure Aryan, the divergence is nowhere to be found, but in the conclusion, the demonstration being equally tendentious"[7].

Within the mentality induced by the communist totalitarian regimes, any attitude or inspiration source related to the Christian religion can be interpreted as a sign of an underground plot, organized by *hooligan*[8] forces. Everything that does not fall into a stable socially - political framework, obviously, anti-Christian one, is undoubtedly, potentially dangerous, if not downright subversive. Loyal to the regime's "line", Nina Cassian talks, spurred by the communist dogma, of the non-existence of Jesus as a historical person, emphasizing His legendary aspect, reaching thus the absolute class and revolutionary vigilance.

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[4] *Ibidem*, p. 55.

[5] Ion Luca, *Salba reginei. Teatru religios.* Bacău: Editura Corgal Press, 2005, p. 53.

[6] Nina Cassian, *O piesă huliganică: „Salba reginei"de Ion Luca.* În: Rampa, 28 septembrie, 1947, p. 3.

[7] *Ibidem*, p. 3.

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 3.

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Voluntary or involuntary, Ion Luca touches here a feature of Judaism, namely the enhanced interest for the side of a mercantilism calculation. Even God's blessing was implored for material prosperity in this world. "*Israel seeks salvation on earth. However, success cannot be harvested but in Heaven. My kingdom is not of this world!*"[9]. The Kingdom of God is no longer the earthly aspiration of a people, be it even justified by the glorification of the Almighty. It is within ourselves, and salvation is not only an act of restoration but an eruption of God in man's life. In Jesus' person, words, and acts, the plenitude of truth is fully manifested, the drama distinguishing the three dimensions of his work: prophetic, sacerdotal, and royal. Judah's suffering goes beyond the things of this world, he does not even claim that he can understand it. Missing the truth, in a sense, while he was one of the twelve, he will undergo, pain-stricken, the hard way of understanding the new teaching, in light of which "*the slavery of conscience weighs heavier than the foreign slavery*"[10].

He penetrates, in the end, the profound meaning of "Jesus' core teaching: Love that bears mercy and mercy that bears forgiveness are not commodities. Trade does not know what mercy is, and I, the merchant, I cannot strive for it ... I went wrong out of passion for Israel."[11] And then, beyond this world awaits consolation: "The teacher of tenderness who suffers and pardons, starts on the way of the cross for my urge. (Heartbreaking.) Ah! I have betrayed innocent blood. I have betrayed innocent blood. (...) I broke trail through the crowd. I wanted to fall on my knees in front of Him, to ask Him to forgive me. However, looking at His face crowned with thorns, streaked by bloody sweet ... (as though if He could see), I saw! ... His eyes were dispersing in His suffering forgiveness to the entire humanity. (Heartbreaking.) But, alas, the one that I have betrayed Him! The consciousness has strangled my voice, and word to ask for His mercy I did not have!"[12]

According to the mentality induced by the synedrion members, any view contrary to theirs, it could have been interpreted as the sign of lawlessness. On a theological level, Judah's attitude is susceptible also of another nuance: human curiosity is a Luciferian component present in humans, which leads him to that "reckless audacity of the mind". It is an established theological cliché, that makes man to be transparent towards the Prince of Darkness' suggestions that, from the illusory lighting and sterile knowledge would collapse him into the abyss of damnation. Judah is a victim of the devil's tactics, precisely because, subconsciously, he has opened the dialogue with the devil; since he cannot accept *metanoia*, cannot ask for forgiveness, he will get to know the diabolical death, not before suffering deeply, experiencing the condemnation to ridiculous, suffering, and (temporary) madness, as a result of the devil's aggression full of black humour.

[9] *Ibidem*, p . 49.
[10] Ion Luca, *Salba reginei. Teatru religios.* Bacău: Editura Corgal Press, 2005, p. 69.
[11] *Ibidem*, p. 74.
[12] *Ibidem*, p. 66.

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The new necklace by an invincible power becomes *the Cross*, this altar where the Son of God sacrificed Himself for humanity and gives the true meaning of love and forgiveness. The essence of the Christian faith consists precisely in the fact that God's power is revealed in sacrifice, in the Cross, and it is inseparable from the Resurrection and together provide the absolute expression of sacrifice, but also of the greatness of love and forgiveness capacity of God. The final part of the drama induces, through the range of bright images, also a point of eschatological initiation into the Light of *the age to come*[13].

Ion Luca touches here also the issue of transition from flesh to spirit, i.e. the man's deification (theosis, or, in mystical terminology, enlightenment) which, as it is well known, was widely exposed and studied in depth in the Eastern patristic theology, being a central dogma of Orthodoxy "Atara (Deificated): Semfora! My soul experiences the brightest of changes! / Semfora: The Lord's suffering Lord announces big changes!"[14]

The Roman World limits its entire faith to the Roman religion (civic and political). And, like in Jerusalem, in Moscow, the Soviet power gives the impression of a religion stranded into politics. If the empire is universal, the Caesar's religion cannot be but legitimately "catholic", it is the subject of a declaration which does not allow any appeal or amendment, by its very legal nature. The intervention against it is liable of the lese-majesty qualification. In Jesus' person and acts, the fullness of truth is fully manifested. Here is revealed the failure of political power: it is the religion of certain split personality impotents, who cannot accept the freedom of conscience, as a source of real freedom. It is the Jerusalem's unjust law, very similar to that imposed by the Soviet Moscow, in all the occupied countries.

Within the mentality induced by communist totalitarian regimes, any source of religious inspiration (mainly evangelical) can be labelled as an "obscure, hooligan, and poisonous"[15] gesture, and it becomes the sign of an underground plot. Everything that does not fall into a stable socio-political pattern is undoubtedly potentially dangerous, if not downright subversive and *hooligan*. With a fanaticism picked out of the proletkultist ideology range, Nina Cassian indulged herself in a real rebellion against the biblical inspiration drama, *Salba reginei*, labelling it in an article published in the drama weekly review *Rampa*, suggestively titled: *A ruffianly piece*, as "a genuine ampoule with obscurantist poison". The authoress circumscribes Ion Luca among those who, without serving the literature, are inciting racial hatred and vitiating the clear judgment of the reader, of the instigators to racial hatred and obstinating the weak spirits. Mr. Ion Luca situates himself with his play among the instigators"[16].

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[13] Paul Evdokimov, Rugul aprins. Timişoara: Editura Mitropoliei Banatului, 1994, p. 37.

[14] Ion Luca, *Salba reginei. Teatru religios.* Bacău: Editura Corgal Press, 2005, p. 71.

[15] Nina Cassian, *O piesă huliganică: „Salba reginei"de Ion Luca.* În: Rampa, 28 septembrie, 1947, p. 3.

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 3.

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Normally, within literary criticism the subject investigated must be *ars poetica*, the literary art in itself rather than the source of inspiration. This fact proves that it is an interpretation from a political perspective – a communist one, which cannot be accepted within literary criticism.

It is true that all his work points to a vigorous writer, nevertheless the dramas of a theological expression are not only significant, but also emblematic ones.

Within *Salba reginei* there is to be found a fundamental dimension of his work, an ability to discern the experience of Orthodox spirituality and to transcends it in art, to transfigure it not into a philosophy of action, nor into a philosophical action, but into pure theology. This will also be the dominant parameter of the drama, I assume also its most profound side.

In fact, it is about a capacity of a complete, humane, Christian, and artistic experience of the fact of life.

Ion Luca is a promoter of existential issues, an artist, a philosopher, and even a theologian of literature. However, to the extent that life identified with art requires it from him.

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